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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [PBTS](#) [ETRD](#) [GG](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIA CLOSES BORDER WITH GEORGIA

REF: A. TBILISI 1647 B. TBILISI 1646 C.

ROBERTSON-REMLER TELCON 7/11/06

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason 1.4 (b, d)

#### Summary

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¶1. (C) Russia closed its one border crossing with Georgia on July 8. In response, on July 9 Georgia closed its "border" crossing into South Ossetia. The South Ossetians have hyped the Georgian move, making the false charge that Georgia has cut the road between South Ossetia and Russia's North Ossetia, and threatening an "appropriate response." The head of the Russian PKF in South Ossetia has backed the South Ossetian charges. The Russian MFA negotiator for South Ossetia told us July 11 he was unhappy with the Russian border closure, which he believed was provoked by statements from Georgian DefMin Okruashvili. We stressed that Russia's action in closing the border had raised tensions and could result in an armed confrontation; the border should be reopened as soon as possible. The closure was harming Armenia and could cause Armenian-Georgian tensions. And it could hamper confidence building measures in Abkhazia. Popov hoped to make progress at the Joint Consultative Council meeting in Tbilisi July 14. End Summary.

#### Sudden Closure

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¶2. (C) At 2210 hours local time on July 7, Russian border officials faxed their Georgian counterparts to say the Verkhnyy Lars border crossing would close at midnight, 1 hour and 50 minutes later. Verkhnyy Lars/Kazbegi is the only functioning border crossing between Russia and non-separatist Georgia. Russia also maintains crossings with separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia that Georgia holds to be illegal. On July 8 the Georgian MFA transmitted a protest note to the Russians pointing out, inter alia, that in accordance with Article V Section 3 of the 8 October 1993 "Agreement of the Governments of the Republic of Georgia and the Russian Federation on Transit Through Customs Borders," a party desiring to limit border transit or communications in order to repair facilities must notify the other party no later than three months prior to the beginning of work, and report the duration of the repair work. The Russian communication did not contain a date for the repair to end.

¶3. (C) In response, Georgia on July 9 closed the crossing between Georgia "proper" (i.e., non-separatist Georgia) and separatist South Ossetia, at Ergneti. The GOG allowed Georgian citizens to transit north to south, and allowed Georgians and others with Georgian visas to transit south to north. No cargoes were allowed to transit. The Georgian Embassy in Moscow informed us that the GOG was opening the road northwards to cargoes until July 14 to allow (mostly Armenian) traders, trapped by the closure of the Verkhnyy

Lars border, to transport their agricultural produce to Russia through South Ossetia. (Note: Russia has long banned Georgian agricultural imports. End Note.)

14. (C) The South Ossetians reacted by sending an angry letter July 10 from their representative on the Joint Consultative Commission (JCC) Boris Chochiyev to his Georgian counterpart, Giorgi Khaindrava. The letter claimed that the Georgians were closing not only Ergneti, but also the highway north of Tskhinvali at the Georgian-controlled villages of Kekhvi and

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Tamarasheni. Such a move would cut off South Ossetia from North Ossetia. (Note: Per Ref C, the OSCE has certified that these charges are untrue. The Georgians have not cut off the highway north of Tskhinvali. End Note.) Chochiyev threatened "appropriate measures" if the Georgians did not remove the checkpoints. The South Ossetians published Chochiyev's letter, and Russian television carried the South Ossetian charges, including the false charges about closure at Kekhvi. Russian media also carried a letter from Russian PKF commander Kulakhmetov to the JCC that condemned the worsening situation and appeared to support the false South Ossetian claim that the Georgians had closed the roads north of Tskhinvali.

Russian MFA

15. (C) Against this backdrop, we approached Russian MFA South Ossetia Negotiator Yuriy Popov to seek the Russian side of the story. Popov (STRICTLY PROTECT) did not seek to maintain the fiction that the border was closed for repair. He said he was "just as unhappy as you are" about the closure, which he called "the wrong move at the wrong time." He had protested the move and especially the lack of notice. He would use his "little influence" in the matter to try to

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reopen the border. He could not, however, predict when the border might reopen.

16. (C) Popov would not say who had ordered the closure, but thought it would not be hard for us to guess (i.e., the military). Asked what had triggered the move, Popov cited Georgian DefMin Okruashvili's recent statements during military exercises. Okruashvili had called on Georgia to demand the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers. "The pronouncement," Popov said, "was read as a direct signal that Georgia is ready to use military force" in South Ossetia. Kulakhmetov's letter to the JCC had noted those military exercises as evidence of Georgia's hostile intentions. We pointed out the inaccuracy of Chochiyev's claim, backed by Kulakhmetov, that the Georgians had closed the roads north of Tskhinvali.

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17. (C) We also pointed to Kulakhmetov's claim that the July 9 assassination of South Ossetian "Security Council Chair" Alborov was an act of terrorism designed to destabilize the situation. We asked for Popov's views. Popov said he thought the Georgians were not responsible. Rather, the matter was "internal" to South Ossetia. He implied that his conclusion was based on Russian intelligence reporting. (Daily "Kommersant" reported May 10, also citing unnamed sources, that the assassination may have been the result of a business dispute over the division of revenues from cigarette smuggling.)

18. (C) We stressed that even if one genuinely believed the Georgians were preparing for war, Russia's border closure was irrelevant and inappropriate to reducing that threat. Rather, it just heightened tensions. The border should be reopened as soon as possible. We said the border closure was worrying for three reasons:

-- The situation around Ergneti is still unfolding. Based on the letters from Chochiyev and Kulakhmetov, the potential for an armed confrontation still exists.

-- The principal burden of the Verkhnyy Lars closure fell on Armenians. Russia was creating tensions between Armenia and Georgia.

-- There could be longer term ramifications for Abkhazia. Several confidence building measures to ease the Abkhazia conflict involved opening borders with the separatist entity -- e.g., the project to re-open a rail link between Sochi and Armenia via Abkhazia/Georgia. Having closed the one functioning border between Russia and non-separatist Georgia, Russia could hardly expect Georgia to be enthusiastic about giving more open-border access to the separatists.

19. (C) Popov reiterated that he had no answers. He said he would be going to Tbilisi on July 13 for the JCC meeting there the following day, and "did not like the idea of going under these circumstances." Nonetheless, he thought the JCC would take place -- no one had approached him about postponing or canceling it -- and it would be good to talk to the Georgians face to face. He expressed appreciation for U.S. efforts to urge President Saakashvili to show restraint during his Washington visit.

Comment

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10. (C) We are at a loss to explain why Moscow -- the central government -- would want to provoke such a crisis between Georgia and South Ossetia on the eve of the G-8 Summit. The action becomes more explicable if we ascribe it to some within the Russian military; and more explicable still if we localize that to the military and local authorities in South Ossetia. What is clear is that Russia's border services made a provocative move (identical to what Armenia inaccurately labels a "blockade" when practiced by Azerbaijan and Turkey), and that the commander of Russia's PKO in South Ossetia backed the inaccurate Ossetian charges that raised tensions even higher. We will continue to press the Russians to re-open the Verkhnyy Lars border.

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